

Pastor Roy's Sermon from July 7, 2013

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the creator and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Children's lesson: Friends. What is a friend? How do you get a friend? How do you stay friends?

Throughout time, spiritual men and women have encouraged and called humanity to learn the ways of wisdom and mercy. Ways which bring life and wholeness. Isaiah and the prophets who followed his lead were such men and women. They continue to call us, as do Jesus and Paul, to also learn and practice these ways. In the Church, we call this the Gospel.

Nothing stirs up feelings about home like being away from home. Isaiah speaks to the homeless exile in chapter 66 about the comfort and healing of home whether we are there or not. The land nurtures and blesses. As exiles they felt disconnected and alienated. The land upon which they lived and worked was someone else's. They were living with somebody else's story. Some would adopt it as their own, but Isaiah knows the power of home and family. The power of belonging. A generation had grieved the loss of home. They were struggling to rediscover their own identity.

For Isaiah life is tied up in the land. God's blessing and the land's blessing are one in the same. Keep in mind that the land around Jerusalem is a land of harsh realities with little rainfall. It's similar to California where only grass grows on the hills and it's brown half the year. If Yahweh, God of Israel, is seen as harsh in parts of the Old Testament, this is understandable. The land was stern.

Economic justice on the street and in villages was vital to the survival of the common worker and those who struggled to survive. This harsh environment nurtured Israel's complex God of judgment and compassion. In Greek and Roman religion, the gods were simply larger than life versions of human beings with the same strengths and weaknesses.

Not so with Yahweh, God of Israel. Here is a God of plumb lines and levels, of fair scales, of fields harvested gently so that the poor could glean for their own survival, a God who took a very dim view of those who manipulated the market toward their own advantage and ease. The prophets of Yahweh had the nerve to call land owners, merchants, judges and kings to compassionate mercy. Getting ahead, making a buck at any cost to the land and to the poor is rejected and rebuked in the scriptures as the height of folly, greed, and spiritual death. The land will not sustain such practices. Such ways are not the ways of creation and God of mercy.

Daily we make decisions which influence the land and those without many resources. Our decisions have local and global effects. Like those who heard the prophets, we are not usually aware that we have economic and social power. We don't give much thought to our moment by moment, daily decisions. Most we never give a second thought since they are habits. We don't pass judgment on our habits because we no longer make choices about them. That is why they are called habits. Habits are difficult to change because we trust in the comfort they bring us—even if that comfort results in negative consequences for us and others. Isaiah reminds us that we connected to the land and the people of the land. This is a gift and a responsibility, and this connection calls us to question our habits.

Then we meet Jesus. Jesus was truly a son of the prophets. He listened to them and learned from them. Jesus, like the prophets, calls disciples and sends them forth in twos.

They proclaim the Gospel in word and deed and are actually pleasantly surprised at the results. They trust God for all of their provisions. They entrust themselves to the land and the people of the land. We have received the same call to care, to participate and enjoy the ebb and flow of life around us. How do we listen to God's voice in creation? How do we listen to one another? This Gospel of listening, giving and receiving life and compassion is the essence of our existence. As we participate in the abundance of God's creative gifts, we are whole. We are well. We learn that we're in this together.

Like the disciples, we are spiritual women and men who follow and lead those around us. We haven't figured it all out, we simply follow and lead. We must lead. Even in following we lead. We take cues from one another in this dance of mercy and peace. Christ calls us to lead well—to be courageous as he so called his disciples.

As the disciples went out, they were surprised that they were leaders. They were surprised that they could heal, that their words found receptive ears, their actions found coworkers in faith.

No one has the corner on inspiration. Everyone can choose the path of giving encouragement, wisdom, and hope. It's not the pastor's job alone, or the president, or the physician, or the teacher. We all serve in these capacities, as we give of ourselves, take chances for good, love freely, give and receive kindness.

The Gospel lesson in our answering this call is that we always have cause for celebration, no matter how good or bad the day has been, as Jesus says, our names are written in the mercy and goodness of God. The power of love is to consider others as much as we consider ourselves. This is dangerous stuff, because we might find ourselves changing as we listen and love.

How is the Spirit calling you to listen and care for those around you? How is the Spirit calling you to rise up and lead? To make the community a better place. To help the land be as God created it to be. We cannot right all the wrongs, but we can leave this community and land better than we found it. It's the little ways of love that make the difference for our families, neighbors, and environment.

Give it some thought. Follow the Spirit into the gifts you have been given. Let us faithfully do as we have been gifted to do. We can do this. Thanks be to God!